White Paper

Report ID: 103987

Application Number: HD-51419-11 Project Director: Marc Brudzinski

Institution: SUNY Research Foundation, College at Purchase

Reporting Period: 9/1/2011-12/31/2013

Report Due: 3/31/2014

Date Submitted: 7/27/2016

Creative Telecollaboration and Language Acquisition Curriculum



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Preface

In this paper we present the results of a Level II grant in Digital Humanities given by the NEH to launch two pilot intermediate-level foreign language classes at Purchase College, the pedagogy for which will integrate computer-assisted language learning (CALL) with the most innovative language acquisition pedagogy. The grant supported the development of digitally-enhanced curricula in Intermediate French, using blogging, videoconferencing, and video production to create cultural bridges between students at Purchase College and students in Marseille. The grant enabled a new style of digital and participatory language instruction, one that emphasizes both grammatical form and the creative use of language among students constructing their own intercultural contexts online. During the project period, participants piloted and implemented new curricula. The lessons learned over the course of the two pilot semesters suggest future directions for other languages, as well as for classes beyond the basic language sequence. They also suggest possibilities for scaling the pilot down to discrete units within a more traditional language class.

Goals

The grant director (Brudzinski) and co-director (Stewart) proposed this grant to develop new techniques of language instruction that would put to use the exciting possibilities offered by digital media. Specifically, we wanted to take advantage of connected media's potential for audiovisual creation, small-group collaboration, and real-time interaction across geographic borders, for the benefit of students learning a new language.

One major innovation in our project was its participatory element. Rather than concentrating on the instructors using connected media to pre-produce packageable images or films for the students to consume, our aim was to give students the tools and conditions with which to engage with the target language audiovisually and interactively through various digital media, along pedagogically-focused lines.

Another major innovation proposed in our project was to move beyond considering digital media as merely a new support for older models of communication for language-learners (in other words, to move beyond the "penpal" model of intercultural language practice for students.) We envisaged using digital media not just as a practical tool, but as a conceptual site for students to experience metalinguistic concepts such as tense and mode through their own audiovisual work. If they could use digital cinematography to visualize linguistic distinctions, such as the distinction between verbal tenses and aspects (in ways described below), then they could more readily assimilate these concepts.

By using digital media as both tool for practice and site for learning, we hoped to address one of the challenges inherent in a project such as this: the risk that increased class time devoted to intercultural linguistic practice would come at the expense of reduced class time devoted to instruction in metalinguistic concepts. In other words, the risk that the students would be interculturally competent but not linguistically proficient.

Process

We carried out the project in two intermediate French language classes. Both times we worked with Tabasco Vidéo, a community video collective in Marseille (France). For each class, we devised a common set of digital media activities appropriate to the intermediate level of instruction in Romance languages. (Table A)

A. Slate of Activities for Creative Telecollaboration

Activity	Description of Activity	Student Learning Outcomes for Second Language Acquisition
1. Self- Presentation Videos	Students produce short, self-narrated videos in the target language introducing themselves and their school. These videos, produced by the participants in both France and the US, will lay the interpersonal groundwork for the semester-long collaboration. In video-conference, participants react to the produced videos by asking each other follow-up questions.	 Review of descriptive adjectives Review of gender and number agreement in adjectives Review of vocabulary relating to body, home, family, city Review of present tense verbs Review of adjectives, vocabulary, and verbs from previous week Review of interrogative forms
2. Narration in	The US students write stories in the past, and French filmmakers take that written text and produce a video interpretation of those written stories.	Deepening understanding of the past tenses and the distinctions between them
the Past	Screening of videos produced. The US students will see how their choice of past tense makes the interlocutor picture the scene in a certain way.	Deepening understanding of the past tenses and the distinctions between them Practice in expressions of gratitude
3. Film Reviews	The US students produce reviews of French films, done in the style of a television show, and send them to the French filmmakers.	 Moving the L2 students from cultural "self-focus" to "other-focus." Refinement of pronunciation Sensitivity to language registers: practice in a formal register
	The reviews are discussed via video-conference with the French filmmakers. This assignment moves the US students from self-focus to other-focus by establishing the cultural point of reference as being outside of the US.	 Moving the L2 students from cultural "self-focus" to "other-focus." Sensitivity to language registers: practice in an informal register Awareness of cultural and historical references implicit in the film Practice in negotiating turn-taking and expressing disagreement
4. Describing "Culture"	In their regular videoconference, the US students read to the French filmmakers one of the "culture" explanations included in their language textbook. The US students ask them to prepare a video response to it.	Practice in future tense Practice in pronunciation
	Students on US side view and discuss the French filmmakers' video response among themselves and then prepare verbal reaction to the video response for the next videoconference.	 Awareness of difficulties involved in representing "culture" Awareness of cultural diversity in countries other than US Practice in subjunctive Practice in conditional

The plan in Table A served as the core of the syllabus for both pilot semesters of Intermediate French. The first-semester students carried out activities 1, 2, and 3. The second-semester students carried out activities 1, 2, and 4; and they studied the text and video produced in the first semester for activity 3. Completing these activities with the same group of filmmakers in Marseille allowed for the students' benefits to be cumulative linguistically, culturally, and interpersonally. In the following sections, we describe the way we managed these activities in more detail and separately, so that interested faculty can learn from our experience and introduce as many or as few of the activities as they see fit, adapting them to their own students' culture of expectations.

Activity 1: Self-Presentation

The students were instructed to work in pairs to produce videos in which each member of the team introduced herself or himself according to the following format:

- 1. Describe yourself using as many adjectives as possible while showing yourself on camera.
- 2. Describe an activity that is important to you while showing yourself doing this activity.
- 3. Describe a significant place on the college campus while showing this place on camera.

This activity was designed to give students practice in several linguistic skills that they needed to review at the beginning of the semester. These were a) review of descriptive adjectives, b) review of gender and number agreement in adjectives, c) review of vocabulary relating to body, home, family, city, and d) review of present tense verbs. The inclusion of an audiovisual element made this activity different from typical written self-introduction exercises done at the beginning of the semester in other language classes. Here, the fact that the viewers could see what was being described or narrated at the same time that they listened to the verbal description and narration was designed to alleviate students' frustration at the incompleteness of their vocabulary (they could simply show whatever they didn't know how to say). At the same time, it was also designed to raise the expectations of students: their description and narration had to match what was on camera. Because of this, the students would know that they could not simply complete the exercise using words and structures they found the easiest to deal with; they had to strive to find words and structures that corresponded to their lived experience. The inclusion of the audiovisual element would therefore help to forge a connection between the language learned in the classroom and its use outside the classroom. This first activity also served practical purposes: to introduce students to each other, to introduce the class and the filmmakers to each other, and to give students practice with the technological tools.

We scheduled a special class session with a staff member who was able to instruct students in the basic uses of iMovie. We found this to be useful, since although many of the students were already more than proficient in the use of video-editing software, many students were not proficient. Giving all students instruction in the basics of video-editing before the first activity was due meant that all students could pull their own weight in the rest of the group video projects, and ensured that all the students appreciated the effort necessary to produce the videos used in this exchange.

The self-presentation video activity had a second phase, which was the discussion over Skype between the class of Purchase students and the filmmakers of Tabasco. The aims of this discussion were both interpersonal and linguistic. Interpersonally, it was important to introduce both groups of participants, and to build the kind of interest and trust that would motivate them to want to impress each other but also to not be afraid of each other. In the case of the language students, we wanted to counter the possible fear, often reported by the students themselves, of native French speakers judging them negatively for speaking imperfectly instead of being interested enough in what they

were saying to try to understand them. Linguistically, this video conversation was important for the purpose of giving students initial practice in understanding live speech in real time. Unlike the conversations they have with their bilingual language professors, here they would be speaking for the first time with monolingual French speakers who may be unaccustomed to making allowances for non-native speakers and for speakers unfamiliar with French culture. Moreover, students and collaborators would be exposed to accents inflected by region and class to which they had not previously been exposed. We explained this dynamic to both groups in an effort to reduce their anxiety by preparing them for the discomfort and frustration they would feel during the conversation. In terms of linguistic structure, we had the students focus on the interrogative form. After viewing Tabasco's self-presentation video and a small sample of the video production visible on the Tabasco website, our class collectively composed a set of questions to ask the filmmakers of Tabasco. The questions would serve as the backbone of the conversation and the length of the list of questions would allow the students to avoid any lulls in the conversation by simply moving on to the next question. We dedicated one class session each semester to the video conversation, including rehearsal of the questions, the conversation itself, and the post-conversation analysis.

Activity 2: Film Reviews

Here the students were to view French films and produce a review in video form. Since our French collaborators at Tabasco were themselves filmmakers, we decided to choose the films from Tabasco's own filmography. Each group of students chose one short film to review, and wrote a review in the form of a TV show modeled on Siskel and Ebert's. The groups submitted the review drafts to the professor for correction, and then continued revising and developing their reviews. After incorporating the revisions, they filmed the reviews and we sent the collection to Tabasco. (Links to the film reviews are provided in the appendices.) We then had a video conference with Tabasco, to discuss the students' reviews.

This activity met the goals we had hoped for it to meet: it moved the students from cultural "self-focus" to "other-focus" by giving them content produced by people in Marseille for people in Marseille (they are in fact a group focussed on local social questions). It allowed students to refine their pronunciation, since they needed to make themselves easily understood by monolingual French speakers. It sensitized them to differences between linguistic registers, through the difference between the colloquial speech captured in the films, and the academic register they used in their review videos. In the question and answer session during the video conference with Tabasco they were able to increase their awareness of the cultural and historical references implicit in the films. They were also able to practice in negotiating turn-taking and expressing disagreement. The anxiety level was lower than in the first video conference, and the general atmosphere was amicable, collaborative, and enthusiastic.

Activity 3: Narration in the Past

The primary linguistic goal of this activity was to address a difficulty typically encountered by students at the intermediate level, which is acquiring the ability to distinguish between two past tenses in French: the *passé composé* and the *imparfait*. The students would write narratives in the past for Tabasco to render into short films. The tenses that the students chose for each action would give precise clues to the native French speakers of Tabasco as to how to represent those actions on the screen. If the tenses were chosen incorrectly with respect to the student authors' intention, the actions in the film would not match the students' imagination. Once the students saw the films, they would see the significance of tense choice for story-telling.

The innovation here lay in three aspects of this activity. First, finding a way for students to explore the distinction between these two French past tenses in a way that made use of their creativity. Second, to give students a new, visual way of understanding the uses of the two tenses by encouraging them to see them as two different cues they give to a cinematographer. Third, to allow students to verify the effectiveness of their tense choices by viewing the mental images created by their text in the mind of a native reader/filmmaker.

First, the students wrote stories in the past tenses. They had been instructed to limit the number of characters to two, and to limit the setting to a public street; these constraints were placed on the assignment in order to make it easier for the filmmakers to produce a film quickly with few actors and without paying for a specific location. Upon completion of the students' story drafts, they held a peer-editing session where they read each other's texts and provided grammatical feedback. Then the professor provided grammatical feedback, drawing the students' attention to areas that may need to be re-written, but without providing the corrections for them. The specific objective here was to allow students to produce their best work, but not to erase tense choices that might sound strange to a native speaker. In this way, the native speakers would be more likely to interpret the story as different from the intention of the student writer, and the student would get visual feedback that would allow him or her to see that tense choice is not so much a matter of right and wrong but a matter of communicating a certain image to the reader.

Because there were more US students than French filmmakers, Tabasco and the professors agreed that we would pare down the class's stories to two, and that Tabasco would produce videos of the chosen two. So on behalf of the class, we submitted the all the class's stories to Tabasco and in our next video conference, the filmmakers from Tabasco announced their two choices to the class. They also explained their criteria: first, they as French people had to be interested in the story. Second, they had to be able to imagine being able to film the story in a location that was easily accessible to them using the number of actors they had available. Immediately after the video conference, the professor and students discussed possible reasons for which some stories proved more interesting than others to the French filmmakers. For example, the prominence of French cultural references in the stories that ended up being chosen. In this way, the filmmakers were able to communicate their choice without students

walking away with negative feedback on their stories if they were not among the ones chosen.

We instructed the filmmakers that, if they encountered any unusual tense choices, they should film the image they saw, no matter how strange it seemed. (For example, if the student author used the *passé composé* for a place-setting description -- instead of the *imparfait*, which is the tense usually used to set a scene in the past -- then the filmmakers should film the description as a discrete action. Or if the student recounted a discrete event using the *imparfait* then the filmmakers might film the action in slow-motion or with the actor performing the action slowly.) However, this instruction did not have the desired effect. The filmmakers were more interested in making a coherent and beautiful narrative film than they were in making a disjointed product. Also, the tense choices in the text were not as dramatically unexpected as possible.

Tabasco ended up taking longer than planned to produce the first of the two videos. The possibility of using the video as feedback for the original author in a classroom setting was therefore lost. However, we were able to use the video as material in the second pilot semester. The second-semester students read the original text written by the first-semester student, and analyzed her tense choices, imagining how each action would be filmed based on the tenses chosen by the author. Then they viewed the video produced from the same text, with the original text appearing as subtitles on the video. The students then had a discussion in class about the cinematography's fidelity to the written text.

If this activity is replicated in the future, there are therefore several lessons we would take into account. We would want to be realistic about the filmmakers' ability to make videos quickly: we would move this activity to the beginning of the semester, we would send only a single story to be filmed, and we would impress on the filmmakers that the film they produce can be less polished than their norm and can look strange if the students' story sounds strange. We would make a model to show them in order to give them a better idea of our aesthetic expectations and the pedagogic uses we want to put the video to. Another idea would be to partner with a film production class whose professor saw a pedagogicaly benefit in using these stories as prompts. Potentially, this could allow several stories to be filmed simultaneously. This would increase the French language students' satisfaction in seeing more of their stories rendered in video, it would allow the class to learn from a greater number of tense/aspect "mistakes," and it would increase the likelihood that the videos would be produced within a short timeframe.

Activity 4: Describing Culture

The purpose of this activity was to confront the descriptions of French culture provided in language textbooks with the French filmmakers' perspectives on their culture. Given that this group of filmmakers work in Marseille (not Paris) and works with questions of African immigration, I expected that they may find discrepancies between their life and the Paris-centric and traditional-minded descriptions of culture that students usually encounter in language textbooks. This would prompt students to question the normativity of the descriptions.

To prepare for the videoconference that would launch this activity, I scanned into one document the various "cultural information" sections supplied in the students' textbook. I found that the descriptions were more nuanced than my general impression held them to be. So I went to several other intermediate-level textbooks and culled the "cultural information" sections from those as well, and included them in the same document. Then I instructed the students to read them all, and to organize the information under different categories. They came up with four categories: friendship, romance, cuisine, and communication. For each categor, they wrote a summary of behaviors that the textbooks described as typically French. In our next video conference with Tabasco, the students read each summary to the filmmakers. They also sent the scans of the cultural descriptions from the textbooks. They asked Tabasco to choose the category they found most interesting, and then asked them to make a film showing themselves in the kinds of situations described in the text in such a way that we would be able to tell which of their behaviors matched the description in the textbooks and which ones were different. The filmmakers chose to focus on cuisine, but indicated that they were choosing this topic because it would allow them to touch on the other categories as well.

In preparation for our final videoconference with Tabasco, the students viewed the video and discussed it in class to arrive at a collective understanding of the cultural behaviors and values being communicated. They compared these to the descriptions given in the textbooks. They drew up questions that they would ask Tabasco in order to verify their understanding of Tabasco's video and to gauge where the filmmakers had a different understanding of French culture from the one given in the textbooks, and where the filmmakers and textbook authors concurred.

Contrary to the professors' expectations, the filmmakers reported that they found the textbook descriptions to be fair and accurate. They told the students that they had taken pleasure in reading from the textbooks because they enjoyed seeing their implicit cultural values described from an outsider's perspective.

The film they produced showed a group of friends meeting for lunch at a couple's house. The students told the filmmakers which parts they thought matched the descriptions, and which parts surprised them. They were not surprised that the filmmakers showed the friends receiving invitations by phone call and text, the couple fighting, the couple preparing the food, the friends arriving late, and the group commenting on the food and lingering over it for hours. The students were surprised that the hosts did not sit at the head of the table and that the guests ate with their hands,

because these things contradicted the formality they expected. The students asked if there were elements that the filmmakers had included but that they (the students) had not noticed. The filmmakers were surprised that the students did not notice the fact that the film showed the hosts visiting many small local shops to buy the ingredients for the meal -- they had thought that this would be novel for Americans.

The most remarkable aspect of this final video conference of the second pilot semester was the markedly lower anxiety level on the part of the students and their much higher level of interest, participation, and spontaneity. The students asked improvised questions and follow-up questions, and both groups -- students and filmmakers -- showed interest in each other's work and lives outside the project. The conversation lasted for almost two hours, and unlike the initial video conference of the same semester, the students were not exhausted from it but rather stayed on to talk about the conversation and congratulate each other on their participation. As one student noted happily, "They were actually interested in what we had to say!" This provided an extremely satisfactory conclusion to the second pilot semester for all involved: students, filmmakers, and professor.

Evaluation

Linguistic and Pedagogical Goals

The two pilot semesters allowed us to test the hypotheses we had laid out and to meet many of the goals we had set related to linguistic pedagogy.

We received confirmation that student creativity is important for teaching linguistic structures because it increases students' feeling of personal investment in the language. Student creativity is also important for teaching linguistic structures because it fosters a sense of low-stakes experimentation rather than high-stakes rule-following. Finally, student creativity is important for increasing affective investment in learning a new language because it encourages students to forge deeper personal bonds with the people they are communicating with in the new language; therefore the students' own interest in communicating accurately is increased.

Cinematography is a genre for the expression of student creativity that can be uniquely useful for language learning because cinematography allows for the juxtaposition of audiovisual presentation and linguistic representation. Cinematography can be used effectively as a tool for visualizing abstract linguistic concepts such as tense, mood, and spatial relations.

Videoconferencing can go a long way in creating and developing bonds as a basis for creative collaboration, and it also increases the desire for face-to-face meeting. Technology can be used to foster creativity rather than to dull it.

Students rise to the challenge of speaking with monolingual speakers of the language they are studying, provided they are able to develop a relationship of trust and creative collaboration. The professor-student bond is strengthened in classes that foreground student creativity, to the enrichment of all. We offer four comments (reproduced in their entirety) offered by students after their final Skype conversation with Tabasco:

"The Skype session was great not just because I got to listen and speak with real French civilians, but because it was nice to make a bond with another culture over a mutual interest: film!"

"Working with Tabasco throughout the course was a killing two birds with one stone sort of deal for me because I love making short films in addition to learning French. What a treat! The second Skype call was especially nice. There was less tension because we were having a real conversation! I feel as if we really wanted to know their answers this time around. The subject matter was light. Tabasco felt like a friend."

"I really enjoyed the Skype conversation and it was a good practice in on the spot speaking with French people who don't know English. The only negative aspect was that due to the quality of Skype it was difficult to understand some of what they were saying. I really enjoyed this exchange with them in general and I feel that it was helpful in solidifying my knowledge of French."

"I enjoyed how willing the people at Tabasco were to listen to us and answer our questions. In the last one, the appearance of the little girl made our affinity with one another even more obvious and touching."

Difficulties Encountered

Our partnership with Tabasco was extremely fruitful and we benefitted greatly from the time, energy, professionalism, and good humor they devoted to this project. Tabasco has a focus on contemporary urban life, but the students who are drawn to the French language class are not united by one shared concern. This lack of thematic focus in the language class could be addressed by making Tabasco and its home city of Marseille more of a unifying factor in the language class. Tabasco's large repertoire of short films viewable online would provide more common ground between the students and the collaborators, without necessitating the production of more new videos by the filmmakers or the foregrounding of urban topics in the language classroom. The filmmakers indicated their interest in pursuing the collaboration beyond the intermediate language classroom. Specifically, they were interested in collaborating with classes studying contemporary urban life and the role of local tradition, or with classes in translation whose students could provide English-language subtitles to some of their films. This would be a way to ensure a more intellectually satisfying experience for the collaborators and to extend the linguistic partnership beyond the courses in the basic language sequence.

As an alternative, there would be great advantages to partnering with a film production class in a country where the target language is spoken. The US students would encounter peers of their own age, the foreign students would earn a grade for their efforts, and there would be more filmmakers producing more videos more quickly. However, these advantages would need to be balanced against additional difficulties: a lower degree of professionalism compared to professional filmmakers might mean that film production students might not submit assignments to use in the exchange. Also, the lack of correspondence between school calendars might reduce the number of weeks that both classes of students are in session at the same time, thereby reducing the number of weeks over which to conduct the telecollaborative exchange.

So much class time was devoted to organizing our work with the filmmakers and then reflecting on it, that parts of the standard curriculum were by necessity neglected. One of these parts was writing. In other words, the students ended up producing less individually written work than students usually do in intermediate language classes at their level. A lot of the students who took these pilot classes, maybe because of the classes, ended up continuing their studies of French. The writing they produced in later semester was of lower quality than that of their peers. Although it is impossible to assert with certainty a causal relationship, this is something that should definitely be addressed in the future. This could mean either assigning more writing on top of the video production assignments and providing more corrective feedack on it, or it could mean simply assessing whether what the students lose in writing skills they gain in intercultural and communicative skills they would not have otherwise. It strikes us that the affective engagement with French culture provided by the telecollaboration

increases student interest in language learning, but that this engagement might require a higher level of commitment by students, with additional writing assignments paired with video assignments to ensure that all learning objectives are achieved.

The face-to-face meetings that the professors held in Marseille with the filmmakers were integral to the success of this pilot. They allowed us to discuss the project at greater length and in greater depth than had been possible in the planning meetings held over Skype. In these conversations we built the trust and familiarity necessary to carry out the intense workload of the following semester over Skype, and to generate new idea for further collaboration in the future. We would recommend that any future projects similar to this one include a provision for the organizers to meet in person regularly, in addition to regular videoconferences. We would also recommend that future projects envisage the possibility of students meeting their collaborators face-to-face as well, since the intense work of this project (in our experience) tended to increase the desire for face-to-face meetings.

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